

Message Text

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ACTION EA-09

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AMEMBASSY PARIS

AMCONSUL HONG KONG

CINCPAC FOR POLAD

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 1 OF 2 VIENTIANE 0259

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PFOR PINS PROP SNAR LA

SUBJECT: VISIT OF PRISON CAMPS AT NAM NGUM RESERVOIR

SUMMARY: DIPLOMATIC CORPS VISITED LPDR "REHABILITATION" CAMPS ON DONE NANG AND DONE THAO ISLANDS IN NAM NGUM RESERVOIR FEBRUARY 5. ALTHOUGH LPDR DENIES THESE ARE CONCENTRATION CAMPS, THEY ARE OBVIOUSLY PENAL INSTITUTIONS. INMATES DESCRIBED AS DRUG ADDICTS, MENTALLY UNBALANCED AND UNEMPLOYED ARE PEOPLE WHO WERE CAUGHT UP IN VARIOUS RAIDS STARTING IN APRIL, 1976, WE SAW ONLY A SMALL PORTION OF THE TOTAL CAMP POPULATION. THE TRIP WAS OBVIOUSLY A PROPAGANDA EXERCISE. (END SUMMARY)

1. FEBRUARY 5 VICE CONSUL AND I ACCOMPANIED LARGE CONTINGENT OF DIPLOMATIC CORPS ON FOREIGN MINISTRY SPONSORED VISIT TO "REHABILITATION" CAMPS ON DONG NANG AND DONE THAO ISLANDS IN THE NAM NGUM RESERVOIR. WE DROVE FROM VIENTIANE TO THE RESERVOIR SITE AND TRAVELED TO THE ISLANDS IN A BOAT MANUFACTURED LOCALLY BUT EQUIPPED WITH AN AMERICAN MADE STEERING SYSTEM.

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2. FOREIGN MINISTRY CHEF DE CABINET SOUBANH SRITHIRATH AND HIS WIFE, CHIEF OF PROTOCOL KHAMTHAN RATANAVONG AND HIS WIFE, AND CHIEF OF CONSULAR AFFAIRS SALY KHAMSY ESCORTED THE GROUP.

3. AT THE FIRST STOP AT DONG NANG (WOMEN'S ISLAND),

SOUBANH INTERPRETED THE OPENING REMARKS OF THE WARDEN INTO FRENCH, MAKING THE FOLLOWING POINTS: THE CAMP WAS STARTED IN APRIL, 1976, FOR THE MORAL AND POLITICAL RE-EUDCATION OF THREE CATEGORIES OF WOMEN: THE DRUG ADDICTS, THE MENTALLY UNBALANCED, AND THE UNEMPLOYED. IT FUNCTIONED IN ACCORDANCE WITH A DOCUMENT DRAWN UP BY THE CENTRAL COMMITTEE OF THE PARTY. IT WAS NOT A CONCENTRATION CAMP AS SOME OBSERVERS FROM DISTANT PLACES HAD REPORTED. 725 GIRLS ARRIVED IN APRIL, 1976. 200 OF THESE HAD BEEN AUTHORIZED TO LEAVE AFTER BEING REEDUCATED BUT FORTY OF THESE CHOSE TO REMAIN AS PART OF THE STAFF. AN ADDITIONAL DETACHMENT ARRIVED IN NOVEMBER, 1976, AND OTHERS CAME ALONG THEREAFTER.

4. WE SAW SOME THIRTY WOMEN PUT ON A PROPAGANDA SONG AND DANCE PROGRAM AND PERHAPS FIFTY OTHERS WORKING SPINNING MACHINES AND HACKING AT THE GROUND WITH POLES. THERE WERE SOME LETTUCE AND TOMATO PATCHES BUT THE BULK OF THE ALLEGED INMATES WERE INVISIBLE. WE DO NOT KNOW WHETHER THEY WERE ELSEWHERE ON THE ISLAND OR SCATTERED ON VARIOUS OTHER ISLANDS.

5. THERE FOLLOW VARIOUS OBSERVATIONS OF THE LAO SPEAKING VICE CONSUL WHO QUESTIONED A NUMBER OF OFFICIALS AND INMATES.

6. SIX MINISTRYOF INTERIOR OFFICIALS SERVED AS WARDENS ON DONG NANG. CHIEF WARDEN SAID THE MENTALLY UNBALANCED WERE KEPT ON A SEPARATE ISLAND BUT NOBODY COULD LOCATE IT PRECISELY OR TELL US WHO LOOKED AFTER CONFIDENTIAL

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THE INMATES. WOMEN DRUG ADDICTS WERE ALL HOUSED IN THE SAME LONG HOUSE. SEVEN OF THE 22 ADDICTS HAD LEFT THE ISLAND AFTER A CURE AND THE OTHERS, ACCORDING TO AN INDIAN WHO MANAGES A SERICULTURE PROJECT ON DONE NANG, WERE LATER MOVED TO A REHABILITATION CENTER AT KILOMTETER 62 ON THE ROAD TO LUANG PRABANG WHERE THE INDIAN MANAGES A SECOND SERI-CULTURE PROJECT.

7. MME. SOUBANH TOLD THE VICE CONSUL THERE WERE NO CHILDREN ON THE ISLAND BUT WE SAW FIVE LITTLE CHILDREN, ALL UNDER TEN YEARS OF AGE, BUSILY WEAVING STRAW HATS. SEEMING GENUINELY SURPRISED, MME. SOUBANH QUESTIONED THE CHILDREN AND THEIR MOTHERS. ONE OF THE MOTHERS SAID HER HUSBAND WAS OFF ON A SEMINAR AND THERE WAS NO ONE ELSE TO LOOK AFTER THE CHILDREN. THIS MOTHER HAD A DARK LEATHERY FACE, WORE A GOLD CHRISTIAN MEDAL NECKLACE, AND ANSWERED MME. SOUBANH IN AN OUTSPOKEN, CONFIDENT MANNER. "LIFE ON THE ISLAND IS NOT BAD", SHE SAID,

"THEY CATCH TWENTY KILOS OF FISH DAILY FROM THE RESER-
VOIR, THE MINISTRY OF INTERIOR SUPPLIES RICE." SHE AND
HER CHILDREN DID NOT REALLY WANT TO RETURN TO VIENTIANE
BECAUSE "WE HAVE TO WORK HERE AND WE WOULD HAVE TO WORK
IN VIENTIANE, SHO WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE?" THE WOMAN
ADDED THAT MUCH OF THE DAY IS SPENT IN POLITICAL SEMINARS.

8. MME. SOUBANH TOLD VICE CONSUL THAT SHE ORIGINALLY CAME
FROM XIENG KHOUANG PROVINCE BUT LIVED WITH HER HUSBAND
INVIENGSAI FOR TEN YEARS. SHE VOLUNTEERED THAT LIFE
IN VIENGSAI IS EXTREMELY DIFFICULT BECAUSE OF THE
"AMERICAN AIRPLANES DROPPING BOMBS". VICE CONSUL REMINED
HER THAT THE WAR IS OVER. SHE THEN SAID THAT WHEN SHE
RETURNED TO VIENGSAI LAST YEAR FOR A VISIT, THE PEOPLE
WERE STILL UNABLE TO TILL FARMLAND BECAUSE OF UNEXPLODED
BOMBS. "WITH PLOWS THAT DIG DEEP AND TURN TO SOIL UP
GENTLY THERE IS LESS DANGER, BUT OUR PEOPLE HAVE NO
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PLOWS AND MUST CHOP THE GROUND WITH HOES WHICH
DETONATES THE BOMBS."

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 2 OF 2 VIENTIANE 0259

9. MRS. SOUBANH COMMENTED THAT THE THIN BAMBOO HUTS

WHICH SERVED AS DORMITORIES FOR THE ISLAND INMATES WERE VERY MUCH LIKE THE HOUSES IN THE NORTHERN PART OF LAOS. "BEFORE WE COULD ONLY LIVE IN CAVES AND THE FORESTS SO THERE ARE FEW PERMANENT WOODEN HOUSES." (COMMENT: ONLY AFTER MADAME SOUBANH HAD EXPRESSED HER RATHER HARD LINE VIEWS DID SHE INQUIRE ABOUT VICE CONSUL'S NATIONALITY. VICE CONSUL SUSPECTS, HOWEVER, THAT MADAME SOUBANH KNEW ALL ALONG WITH WHOM SHE WAS SPEAKING. END COMMENT)

10. AFTER A GROUP OF JOYLESS IF NOT CLUMSY GIRLS DANCED AND SANG REVOLUTIONARY SONGS, THE DIPLOMATIC PARTY BOATED TO DONE THAO OR BOYS ISLAND. NO ENTERTAINMENT WAS PROVIDED BY THE INMATES OF DONE THAO. IN FACT, ONE GOT THE IMPRESSION THE INMATES WERE PURPOSELY KEPT AWAY FROM DIPLOMATIC VISITORS. AT ONE POINT, HOWEVER, VICE CONSUL DRIFTED AWAY FROM THE PARTY TO MAKE CONTACT WITH A GROUP OF FIVE YOUNG BOYS IN A READING ROOM STOCKED WITH RED CHINESE, SOVIET AND LAO COMMUNIST PAMPHLETS. VICE CONSUL ASKED THE BOYS, WHO WERE IN THEIR LATE TEENS AND STILL CLAD IN FADED BLUE
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JEANS WITH COLORFUL PATCHES, A FEW DISARMING QUESTIONS. AT FIRST THE BOYS REPLIED WITH PERFUNCTORY GRUNTS BUT WHEN EMBOFF ASKED IF THEY EVER GOT ANY MEAT TO EAT NONE OF THE BOYS DARED TO ANSWER. VICE CONSUL'S FURTHER QUESTIONS MET WITH THE SAME SILENCE CRACKLING WITH INTIMIDATION.

1. LATER WHEN THE DIPLOMATIC PARTY WAS ALLOWED TO WANDER THROUGH THE HANDICRAFT CENTER WHERE A GROUP OF ABOUT TWENTY MEN, MOST OVER SIXTY YEARS OLD, WERE WEAVING RICE BASKETS, VICE CONSUL ASKED THE SAME QUESTION. "NO, WE HAVEN'T HAD ANY PROK, BEEF, OR BUFFALO SINCE I FIRST CAME HERE LAST APRIL", GRUMBLED ONE OLD INMATE. "ALL WE GET TO EAT IS RICE AND FISH." ALTHOUGH THE ISLAND CAMPS ARE SUPPOSEDLY SELF-SUFFICIENT IN VEGETABLES, WE OBSERVED VERY FEW GARDENS.

12. VICE CONSUL ASKED THE SAME INMATE ABOUT HEALTH CONDITIONS AND HE POINTED UP THE TRAIL SAYING "THERE IS A HOSPITAL UP THE HILL FILLED WITH PEOPLE WITH MALARIA. WE HAVE A LOT OF SNAKES HERE TOO." AS A SMALL GROUP OF DIPLOMATS STARTED OFF IN THE DIRECTION OF THE CLINIC, ESCORTS FROM THE MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS CALLED THE GROUP BACK. EVIDENCING DISPLEASURE, SALY KHAMSY, DIRECTOR OF CONSULAR AFFAIRS, SIGNALLED TO VICE CONSUL STOP QUESTIONING THE INMATES ABOUT CAMP CONDITIONS.

13. WHILE IN THE HANDICRAFT CENTER AN INMATE WHO SAID

HE WAS SIXTEEN YEARS OLD BUT WHO LOOKED MUCH YOUNGER
CAUGHT THE ATTENTION OF RUSSIAN AMBASSADOR PODOLSKI.
PODOLSKI REQUESTED VICE CONSUL TO ASK THE BOY IN LAO WHERE
HIS PARENTS WERE AND WHY HE HAD COME TO THE ISLAND.
THE BOY SAID HIS PARENTS LIVED IN CHINAIMO OUTSIDE
VIENTIANE AND THAT HE HAD COME TO "STUDY SOCIALISM"
UNHAPPY WITH VICE CONSUL'S TRANSLATION, PODOLSKI CALLED
SOUBANH OVER TO ASK THE SAME QUESTIONS. WHEN HE GOT
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THE SAME ANSWERS, PODOLSKI TURNED TO VICE CONSUL AND SAID,
"I LIKE CHILDREN, THEY SHOULD NOT BE SEPARATED FROM
THEIR PARENTS".

14. ONE OF THE ONLY EVIDENCDS OF POLITICAL EDUCATION
WAS A BULLETIN BOARD DISPLAYING CLIPPINGS FROM LPDR
PARTY NEWSPAPER, "VOICE OF THE PEOPLE", SHOWING
PHOTOS OF THAMMASAT UNIVERSITY STUDENTS KILLED IN THE
THAI OCTOBER 6 INCIDENTS.

15. AS IN DONE NANG, IT IS UNCLEAR AS TO HOW MANY IN-
MATES ARE INCARCERATED ON DON THAO. VICE CONSUL ASKED ONE
WARDEN WHO QUICKLY RESPONDED, OVER 2000. AFTER PAUSING
A MOMENT HE CHANGED HIS ANSWER TO OVER 1000. IN THE
ORIENTATION SPEECH ANOTHER WARDEN SAID THERE WERE 1500.
VICE CONSUL ASKED AGAIN ANOTHER WARDEN WHO CONFIDENTLY
ANSWERED THAT THERE WERE OVER 2000 INMATES. IN ANY
EVENT, OUR PARTY SAW AT MOST ONE HUNDRED MEN WEAVING,
LAZILY BUILDING SHANTIES, OR SIMPLY IDLING.

16. INMATES AND WARDENS WITH WHOM VICE CONSUL SPOKE SAID
THERE WERE MANY OTHER ISLANDS WITH NAMES LIKE PEACE,
DEMOCRACY, CLEANLINESS, INDEPENDENCE, ETC. OUR BOAT
PASSED SEVERAL OTHER SETTLEMENTS WHERE HANDFUL OF MEN
COULD BE SEEN MAKING CHARCOAL OR WASHING CLOTHES IN
BRACKISH WATER.

17. ON PEACE ISLAND THE MINISTRY OF INTERIOR HAS JUST
COMPLETED AN ATTRACTIVE, MODERN HOTEL. VICE CONSUL
LATER TOLD BY TOP UNDP OFFICIAL THAT THE HOTEL WAS
BUILT WITHOUT FOREIGN AID ALTHOUGH THE LAO HAD ASKED
FOR HELP. THE HOTEL WILL REPORTEDLY BE USED FOR
ENTERTAINING VISITING GOVERNMENT DELEGATIONS.
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